

Possessum, Transitivity, and Ergativity in Yupik Eskimo*

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0. Introduction

In Eskimo¹ the absolutive (or nominative) marks both the subject of an intransitive sentence and the direct object of a transitive sentence, whereas the ergative (or relative)² marks the subject of a transitive sentence. The opposition *ergative* (ERG) vs. *absolutive* (ABS) is shown by an overt case ending for the ergative and no overt case ending for the absolutive³.

- (1) Agh'naq- ϕ negh'uq. (The woman eats/is eating.)
 woman-ABS eats
(2) angute-m neghaa neqa- ϕ (The man eats the fish.)
 man-ERG/3s eats fish-ABS

The transitive sentence is, however, not the only one in which the difference between the subject and object is made by use of a different case. Aside from the function of the subject of a transitive verb, the ergative has another function. In the possessive construction of Yupik Eskimo (or Yupik), the possessor-NP is in the ergative case, and the possessed-NP, which normally comes after the possessor-NP,⁴ agrees in number with the possessor-NP with which it occurs. Thus, the possessed noun (PSD) not only triggers verb agreement in a sentence but also provides information about the number of the possessor (PSR) noun. That is, it expresses both the grammatical number of the possessor and the grammatical number of the possessed noun.

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¹ Eskimo is known as a polysynthetic language in which the word-building device performs much of the work that is achieved by the syntax in many other languages. The Eskimo language is exclusively suffixational. Each word contains one and only one stem (or extended stem), nominal or verbal, to which any number of suffixes can be agglutinated. Thus, words of any length can be constructed by suffixation. The Eskimo variety treated here is the Yupik dialect which is spoken in the southwest part of Alaska.

Precise phonological explanations are not given here throughout as they are discussed elsewhere or they are immaterial for the purpose of the present paper. The rules given here are not the final forms; they are merely for the reader's convenience.

² The terms relative and ergative are interchangeably used here throughout.

³ The ergative case in various languages is typically marked with an ending, while the absolutive case is without an ending. See Itkonen (1979: 84).

⁴ Sadock (1980: 304, 309) reports that in Greenlandic the possessed noun follows the possessor noun. In Yupik Eskimo the relative word order between the possessed noun and possessor noun is not fixed. Thus *agh'nam qimuxtii* (see Sentence 3) 'the woman's dog' is equivalent to *qimuxtii agh'nam* without changing its meaning. However, the possessor noun normally precedes the possessed noun.

- (3) agh'na-m qimuxtii (qimuxte-a- ϕ)⁵ (the woman's dog)
 woman-ERG/s dog-PSD/s-PSR/3s
- (4) agh'na-m qimuxtai (qimuxte-i- ϕ)⁶ (the woman's dogs)
 woman-ERG/s dog-PSD/p-PSR/3s
- (5) agh'na-m qimuxtii (qimuxte-a- ϕ) negh'uq (negu'uq- ϕ)
 woman-ERG/s dog-PSD/3s-PSR/3s eat-SUB/3s
 (The woman's dog is eating)
- (6) Agh'na-m qimuxtai (qimuxte-i- ϕ) negh'ut (negh'uq-t)
 woman-ERG/s dog-PSD/3p-PSR/3s eat-SUB/3p
 (The woman's dogs are eating.)

However, in the possessive construction of an intransitive sentence or in that of the object-NP of a transitive sentence, the possessor noun which is possessed by another possessor noun does not take the same ergative ending as the unpossessed possessor noun; it takes a different ending, 'double possessor' (DoPos):

- (7) Angute-m nuliagh-an qimuxtii (qimuxte-a- ϕ) negh'uq.
 man-ERG wife-Dopos dog-PSD/s-PSR/s eats
 (The man's wife's dog is eating.)
- (8) Pisuxhte-m neghehl'xhua agh'na-m angutiin (angut-an) neqii (Neqe-a- ϕ).
 hunter-ERG ate woman-ERG man-DoPos fish-PSR/s
 (The hunter ate the woman's man's fish.)
- (9) Pisuxh'te-m agh'naan (agh'na+an) neghehl'xhua neqa (neqe- ϕ).
 hunter-ERG woman DoPos ate fish-ABS/s
 (The hunter's woman ate fish.)
- (10) Angute-m agh'niin (agh-na-an)⁷ qimuxtiin (qimuxte-an) neghaa neqa (neqe- ϕ).
 man-ERG woman-DoPos dog-DoPos eats fish-ABS/s
 (The man's woman's dog is eating the fish.)
- (11) Angute-m agh'niin (agh'na-an) aaniin (aana-an) qimuxtiin (qimuxte-an)
 man-ERG woman-DoPos mother-DoPos dog-DoPos
 neghai neqet (neqe-t).
 fish-ABS/p
 (The man's woman's mother's dog is eating fishes.)

we note above that the possessed noun appearing in the subject-NP of a transitive sentence apparently does not take the same possessive ending used in the subject-NP of the intransitive sentence or in the object-NP of the transitive sentence.

⁵ The elements enclosed by parentheses represent the underlying or intermediate forms. Notice that in their interpretation of the possessive noun, Sadock (1980) and Allen (1964) claim that the possessor morpheme precedes the possessed morpheme in the Eskimo dialect they discuss.

The sequence $e[i]+a$ is regularly flattened to ii in this environment. The orthography used is Koo's (1978). Some orthographic symbols employed and their phonetic values are:

$e=[i]$ or $[ə]$, $xh=[x]$, $gh=[ʁ]$, $hl=[ʈ]$, $g=[ɣ]$

⁶ The $e[i]$ is lowered to a here. The word final e changes to a if it is preceded by a single consonant. For details, see Koo (1974).

⁷ The sequence $a+a$ is raised to ii in some Yupik villages.

⁸ For further discussion, see below.

Compare the sentences below in which the contrast between the possessive NP as the object and the possessive NP as the subject of a transitive clause is clearly revealed:

- (12) Tangehl'xhuaqa agh'na-m qimuxtii (qimuxte-a- ϕ).
 I saw it woman-ERG dog-PSD-PSR
 (I saw the woman's dog.)
- (13) Agh'na-m qimuxtiin (qimuxte-an) tangehl'xhuanga
 woman-ERG dog-DoPos it saw me
 (The woman's dog saw me.)

In (13) above the DoPos *an* is added to the possessed NP,⁸ while in (12) the possessive *a* (i.e., possessed *a*+possessor ϕ) is added.

The rule that will account for the possessive construction discussed above can be roughly formulated as follows:

RULE I. POSSESSIVE-NP \rightarrow PSR-NP (DoPos-NP)* PSD-NP

That is, the possessive phrase consists of Possessor-NP, optionally followed by DoPos-NP, and Possessed-NP. The recursive notational device (*) will then generate any number of DoPos-NP as needed. Furthermore, the above rule shows relative order of the possessive elements within the possessive construction that is to be maintained. The following is the case marking rule:

RULE II. SD: [PSR-NP (DoPos-N)* PSD-NP]_{NP}, V, Object-NP
 1 2 3 4 5
 SC: 1+ERG 2+DoPos 3+DoPos 4 5

On the other hand, if the possessive-NP is used as the object, or as the subject NP of an intransitive sentence, then 3 receives absolutive marking.

The chart below shows the ergative endings used with 'unpossessed' nouns:

<i>SG</i>	<i>DU</i>	<i>PL</i>
<i>-m</i>	<i>-k</i>	<i>-t</i>

Notice that the ergative dual and plural case endings are exactly the same as the dual and the plural number endings. This naturally results in some semantic ambiguity. Consider the following sentence:

- (14) Agh'nat kenkait angutet
 (agh'na-t love angute-t)
 woman-PL man-PL

The above sentence is ambiguous in two ways:

The women love the men.
 The men love the women.

For there is no morphological distinction between the ergative plural and the plural number.

1. Parallelism between Transitive Verb and Possessive NP.

We observe below the existence of a parallelism in morphology between the transitive verb and the possessive NP (particularly the pronominal possessive NP). The possessor corresponds to the subject of the transitive and the possessed to the object.

<i>Possessive NP</i>	<i>Transitive Verb</i>
(15) a. qimuxteka (my dog) (qimuxte- ϕ -ka) dog-PSD/3s-PSR/1s	b. Tang'hlxuaqa. (I saw it.) (tang'hlxhu-aq- ϕ -ka) ⁹ saw-TR-OBJ/3s-USB/1s
(16) a. patua (his cover) (patu-a- ϕ) cover-PSD/3s-PSR/3s	b. Tang'xhaa. (She sees him.) (tang'xh-aq-a- ϕ) see-TR-OBJ/3s-SUB/3s
(17) a. patui (his covers) (patu-i- ϕ) cover-PSD/3p-PSR/3s	b. Tang'xhai. (She sees them.) (tang'xh-aq-i- ϕ) see-TR-OBJ/3p-SUB/3s
(18) a. uciat (their load) (uci-a-t) load-PSD/3s-PSR/3p	b. Tang'xhaat. (They see him.) (tang'xh-aq-a-t) see-TR-OBJ/3s-SUB/3p
(19) a. uciit (their loads) (uci-i-t) load-PSD/3p-PSR/3p	b. Tang'xhait. (They see them.) (tang'xh-aq-i-t) see-TR-OBJ/3p-SUB/3p
(20) a. tepekek ¹⁰ (their ₂ odors ₂) (tepe-xk-k) odor-PSD/3d-PSR/3d	b. Paixh'taxkek. (They ₂ meet them ₂ .) (paixh'te-aq-xk-k) meet-TR-OBJ/3d-SUB/3d
(21) a. patuik ¹¹ (their ₂ covers) (patuzi-k) cover-PSD/3p-PSR/3d	b. Kiugakek. ¹² (They ₂ answer them.) (kiuk-aq-i-k) answer-TR-OBJ/3p-SUB/3d

It is thus conceivable why Hammerich (1936) was prompted to claim that every Eskimo verbal form should be considered as an "original substantive." Following Hammerich's position, Mey (1969) proposed a transformational analysis to show the relatedness between transitive and possessive constructions, interpreting the possessive construction as a special case of transitivity, as transformed transitive sentences.

Kalmár (1979: 47-9) interprets the possessive construction as the predicator with agent and patient. There is, however, no transparent evidence as to why the suffixes attached to the possessed noun are called verbal person markers when there is no verbal

⁹ The *k* of the morpheme *-ka* is fused with the *q* of the transitive morpheme *-aq* resulting in *-qa*. Note that the *q* is deleted intervocalically (see example 16b).

¹⁰ The form *tepekek* is alternatively used with *tepaik*. For the vowel lowering rule, see footnote 6. The above rule seems to work only with the possessive construction. See also footnote 11.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that *patuik* is also alternatively used with *patukek*. The *k* and *i* seem to be in free variation when the possessed is either dual or plural before the dual possessor. Thus semantic ambiguity arises in this environment. See also 21b.

¹² See footnote 11. The *e* before the final *k* is an epenthetic vowel inserted to break the unpermitted consonant cluster. The first *k* in *kuigakik* is from the underlying *i*. The *i* seems to have been replaced with *k* after the deletion of the intervocalic *q*.

indicator in the possessive structure. One can see from examples (15b) to (21b) above that there are other important differences besides the presence of the transitive suffix *-aq* attached to the verbal stem in the transitive construction. Suffixes such as tense and mood belong exclusively to verbal stems, not to nominal stems. Regardless of the conspicuous similarity between the two constructions, we believe that the transitive and the possessive constructions are derived from different representations; one is based on the nominal stem, and the other on the verbal stem.

2. Pronominal Possessives

Notice also that the ergative marking does not take place with pronouns or pronominal possessive NP (i.e., NP's with possessive affixes). The NP which will otherwise receive the ergative marking remains unmarked if the NP is [+PRO]. The verb does, however, agree with the subject and the object of the sentence. Consider the following sentences:

- (22) Hwinga asiilkehl'xhuaqa neqa. (I hated the fish.)
 I (asiilke-hl'xhu-aq-a-ka) fish
 hate-PAST-TR-OBJ/3s-SUB/1s
- (23) Ehlpet neghehl'xhuan neqa. (You ate the fish.)
 you (neghe-hl'xhu-aq-a-n) fish
 eat-PAST-TR-OBJ/3s-SUB/2s
- (24) Ehlait neghaat neqa. (They are eating the fish.)
 they (neghe-aq-a-t) fish
 eat-TR-OBJ/3s-SUB/3p
- (25) Aatama asiilkehl'xhua¹³ neqa. (My father hated the fish.)
 (aata-ma asiilke-hl'xhu-aq-a- ϕ) fish
 father-my hate-PAST-TR-OBJ/3s-SUB/3s
- (26) Aanavet neghehl'xhua neqa. (Your mother ate the fish.)
 (aana-vet)
 mother-your
- (27) Aaniin asiilkehl'xhua aanan. (His mother hated your mother.)
 (aana-an) (aana-n)
 mother-his mother-your
- (28) Aanii ayahl'xhuuq. (His mother went.)
 (aana-a aya-hl'xhu-uq)
 mother-his go-PAST-INTR/3s

We notice above that the pronominal possessive ending used in the intransitive sentence is different from the one used in the transitive sentence. For instance, we find two different forms for the expression 'his mother' in (27) and (28). The pronominal possessive of the subject-NP in (27) is *an*, whereas the pronominal possessive of the subject-NP in (28) is *a*. We can thus divide the pronominal possessives into two categories —erga-

¹³ Notice that in Kalmár's analysis the possessor and the possessed are not separated. See Kalmár (1979: 30).

tive and absolutive pronominal possessives — in that the endings of the former category correspond to the ergative endings and the endings of the latter category to the absolutive endings. The pronominal possessive endings of the categories are in complementary distribution as are ergative and absolutive case endings. Notice that if the object-NP is indefinite (i.e., suffixed by the indefinite number ending *-mek* or *-nek*), the verb takes the intransitive ending (see Section 3). See more examples below:

- (29) Aataka asiilkehl'xhuuq neqemek. (My father hated a fish.)
 (aata-ka) asiilke-hl'xhu-uq (neqe-mek)
 father-my hate-PAST-INTR/3s fish-IND/s
- (30) Aanan ayahl'xhuuq. (Your mother went.)
 (aana-n)
 mother-your
- (31) Aatama asiilkaa aanan. (My father hates your mother.)
 (aata-ma asiilke aq-a-φ aana-n)
 father-my hate-TR-OBJ/3s-SUB/3s mother-your
- (32) Aataftek negh'aa neqa. (Your/d father is eating the fish.)
 (aata-ftek) eats fish
 father-your/d
- (33) Aatiignek negh'aa neqa. (Their/d father is eating the fish.)
 (aata-agnek)
 father-their/d

The chart below displays the possessive endings of the two categories:

Table 1.

Absolutive Possessives (with PSD/s) ¹⁴		
1st	SG	-ka (my)
	DU	-puk (our/d)
	Per	-put (our/p)
2nd	SG	-n (your)
	DU	-tek (your/d)
	Per	-ci (-ti) (your/p)
3rd	SG	-a (his)
	DU	-ak (their/d)
	Per	-at (their/p)

Table 2.

Ergative Possessives (with PSD/s)	
1st	-ma
	-mnuk/-megnuk
	-mta
2nd	-fet/-pet
	-ftek/petek
	-fci/-peci
3rd	-an
	-agnek
	-ita

Furthermore, it should be noted that the pronominal possessives used with other suffixes are different from those used in the ergative and the absolutive constructions. The following are some examples and a chart of the possessives used as such:

¹⁴ For a complete list of possessive endings in this category, see Koo (1978: 73).

- (34) *angyamni* (*angya-m-ni*) (in my boat)
boat-Pos/1s-Loc
- (35) *qayamteni* (*qaya-mt-ni*) (in our/p kayak)
boat-Pos/1p-Loc
- (36) *qayavni* (*qaya-f-ni*)¹⁵ (in your kayak)
boat-Pos/2s-Loc
- (37) *qayaftegni* (*qaya-ftek-ni*) (in your/d kayak)
kayak-Pos/2d-Loc
- (38) *enemnun* (*ene-m-nun*) (to my house)
house-Pos/1s-Dir
- (39) *enevnun* (*ene-f-nun*) (to your house)
house-Pos/2s-Dir
- (40) *ayakataxh'tua eniinun.* (I am going to go to his house.)
am going to go (*ene-a-nun*)
house-Pos/3s-Dir

Table 3.

	1st Person	2nd Person	3rd Person
SG	-m	-f	-a
DU	-mk	-ftek	-k
PL	-mt	-fci	-t

Hence there are three types of pronominal possessive endings used in Yupik which are syntactically closely related to each other. The ergative possessives (see Table 2) are more similar, morphologically, to the pronominal possessives used with other suffixes (see Table 3) than to the absolutive possessive endings (see Table 1).

3. Indefiniteness and Ergative Marking.

It seems that the ergative case marking in Yupik depends not only on the realization of a particular syntactic relationship,¹⁶ namely the presence or absence of the object-NP, but also on the definiteness (DEF) or indefiniteness (INDEF) of the object-NP.¹⁷ Consider the following data:

- (41) *Angun* (*angute-φ*)¹⁸ *negh'uq neqemek* (*neqe-mek*).
man eats fish-INDEF/s
(The man eats/is eating a fish.)
- (42) *Pisuxhta* (*pisuxhte-φ*)¹⁹ *negh'uq neqenek* (*neqe-nek*).
hunter-ABS eats fish-INDEF/p
(The hunter is eating some fish.)

¹⁵ The *f* is voiced before a voiced segment.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion on case, see Lyons (1966: 218).

¹⁷ For more details, see Koo (1979: 82).

¹⁸ The sequence *te* systematically changes to *n* word finally if it is preceded by a vowel. Otherwise, the word final *e* is lowered to *a*.

¹⁹ See footnote 18 above.

The morphemes *mek* and *nek* are apparently associated with a deictic category. They are lexical morphemes, not grammatical morphemes. The object-NP's *neqemek* and *neqenek* do not trigger verb agreement as the object-NP's of [+DEF] do in the transitive sentence. The verbs are intransitive with respect to the object; the verbs do not agree with their objects. The above sentences only in appearance are semantically transitive. Consider their corresponding transitive sentences:

- (43) Angutem (angute-m) neghaa (neghe-aq-a- ϕ) neqa (neqe- ϕ).
 man-ERG/s eat-TR-OBJ/s-SUB/s fish-ABS

(The man is eating the fish.)

- (44) Pisuxhtem (pisuxhte-m) neghaa neqet (neqe-t).
 hunter-ERG/s fish-DEF/p

(The hunter is eating the fishes.)

Of interest here is the fact that the indefinite markers *-mek* and *-nek* are never used with the subject-NP; they are associated only with the object-NP. The distinction between definiteness and indefiniteness cannot be made with the subject-NP as with the object-NP. The sentence below can thus be translated either as 'a hunter loved the woman' or 'the hunter loved the woman' by the context.

- (45) Pisuxh'te-m kenkhl'xhua agh'naq.
 hunter-ERG loved woman

Kalmar (1979: 33) claims that in Inuktitut there is the so-called 'active' transitive clause in which the subject is nominative (or absolutive) and the direct object is oblique.²⁰ He provides as evidence the following Inuktitut examples:

- (46) Arnaq qimmir:*mik* taku:v :uq
 woman dog Acc see MN²¹ 1 place²²

(A/the woman saw a dog.)

- (47) Jaani inung :*nik* tuki :si:v :uq
 John Inuk/person ACC understand :si:MN 1 place

(John understands Inuit/people.)

It raises, however, an interesting question of whether the morphemes *mik* and *nik* (corresponding to the Yupik *mek* and *nek* respectively) can be treated as accusative case markers or as instrumental case markers (Sadock: 1980). The verbs used are obviously intransitive with the subject in absolutive despite the presence of the object-NP's. Apparently,

²⁰ The 'active' transitive clause corresponds to the 'antipassive' clause in his work (1979b).

²¹ MN=mood marker.

²² The terms 'one-place' and 'two-place' come from Lyons (1968). A one-place verb means a verb that requires only one nominal, i.e., the actor, while a two-place verb is a verb which requires two nominals, i.e., the actor and the goal. These verbs are traditionally called respectively intransitive verb and transitive verb.

these case labels are misnomers.

4. Concluding Remark

It is hoped that the present exposition will help to explain some areas of the possessive construction in Yupik, particularly with regard to pronominal possessives and the role of definiteness vs. indefiniteness in ergative marking. These have not received much attention in the Eskimo literature.

In the present paper, it is shown that possessive constructions are not derived from transitive sentences as Mey contends. I agree with Rischel (1971) that Mey's transformational interpretation of the relatedness between the two constructions is interesting but not convincing, as is briefly discussed above.²³ It is, however, unclear in Eskimo whether the case indicating the possessor has developed into the subject of a transitive sentence as in many other ergative languages (Itkonen, 1979: 97).

Finally, it should be mentioned here that the possessive affix morphology is one of the most confusing subjects in Yupik Eskimo, and that not many Eskimo speakers can produce, without difficulty, all the possessive or transitive affixes. This is partly due to the fact that many possessive affixes (e.g., singular and plural) are not distinct in form from each other (see Tables above and in APPENDIX).

APPENDIX²⁴

Table 4. Absolutive Possessives (Dual, Plural and 3rd Person Reflexive)

P O S S E S S O R	PSD:		Dual		Plural		Dual		Plural	
	1st	S	-ka		-nka ²⁵		S	-xken	-ten	
		D	-xpuk		-puk ²⁶		D	-xtek	-tek	
		P	-xput		-put		P	-xci	-ci	
	3rd	S	-k		-i					
		D	-xkek		-kek/-ik ²⁷					
		P	-xket		-it					

Table 5.

P S R	PSD:		Singular		Dual		Plural	
	3R	S	-ni		-gni		-ni	
		D	-tek		-xtek		-tek	
		P	-teng		-xteng		-teng	

²³ For a review of Mey's theory, see Rischel (1971).

²⁴ We notice in Yupik that many possessive endings are not phonetically distinct from each other, thus causing semantic ambiguity (e.g., 2nd and 3rd reflexive possessives). The meaning is thus determined by the context.

²⁵ The morpheme *n* seems to be a variant of the plural *t*.

²⁶ The morpheme *p* appears to be a variant of *f*. See Table 2.

²⁷ See footnotes 10 and 11.

Table 6. Relative Possessives (Dual, Plural, and 3rd Person Reflexive):

P O S S E S S O R	PSD:		Dual		Plural	
	1st	S	-gma	-ma		
		D	-gmegnuk	-megnuk	2nd	-xpet
		P	-gemta	-mta		-pet ²⁸
	3rd	S	-xken	-in		-xpetek
		D	-xkenka	-kenta		-petek
		P	-xketa	-ita		-peci

Table 7

P S R	PSD:		Singular		Dual		Plural	
	3R	S	-mi		-gmi		-mi	
		D	-mek		-gmek		-mek	
		P	-meng		-gmeng		-meng	

Data: nunapuk (nuna-puk) 'our/d place(s),' nunaxpuk (nuna-xpuk) 'our/d places/d,' nunaxtek (nuna-xtek) 'your/d place/d,' nunatek (nuna-tek) 'your/d places,' getuneghaxh'-tek (getuneghag-tek) 'their/d own son or sons,' nunaput (nuna-xput 'our places,' nunaci (nuna-ti) 'your/p places,' nunaxka (nuna-xka) 'my places/d,' nunanka (nuna-nka) 'my places,' nunaxken (nuna-xken) 'your places/d,' patuten (patu-ten) 'your covers,' ang'-yamini (ang'ya-mi-ni) 'in his own boat,' ang'yagmini (ang'ya-gmi-ni) 'in his own boats/d,' ang'yagmegni (ang'ya-gmek-ni) 'their/d own boat/d'

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²⁸ The suffix *-pet* has as a variant the form *-vet*. See also 10 and 11 above.

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